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ABSTRACT

Rural education reform manifest in the U.S. "Country Life Movement" of the early 1900's centered on the doctrine of economic efficiency. Rural education reformers believed that high food prices were due to the inefficiency of farmers and the general discontent of rural peoples exemplified by the rural to urban migration. The rural education system was perceived as the key to rendering rural people "efficient and contented" enough to produce the nation's food. The rural school was perceived as the most important institution of change because: there was faith in its ability to change people; it was a publicly-controlled institution amenable to public pressure; it directly influenced people when they were young and pliable; and it was an especially significant institution in the country. Country Lifers perceived change in terms of reorganization (curriculum reform which would produce more aesthetically contented and more scientifically skilled people) and redirection (school consolidation). Fearing the loss of local control and resenting the condescending attitudes of the largely urban oriented reformers, the rural people opposed reform, while the reformers retaliated with charges of ignorance and viciousness. After 1920, interest in rural school reform declined sharply, mainly because food prices fell considerably after 1920. (JC)

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Toward An "Efficient and Contented" Agriculture: The Goals of Rural Education Reform, 1900-1920

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Beginning in the 1890's, American educators embarked on an ambitious campaign to restructure the rural primary school system of the United States. After 1900 this movement intensified and gained increasing national attention, becoming part of the Country Life Movement and reaching a crescendo in the period of the First World War. It continued after the war, but after 1920 the movement to reform rural education went into a decline and never recaptured its early enthusiasm and fervor.

The impulse to reform the rural education system was an urban one. Rural education reform was led by urban educators, it attempted to renovate rural schools on the basis of urban models, and it was stimulated and sustained by the urban fear that economic inefficiency in agriculture presented the nation with serious dangers. The goal of rural education reform was the creation of an efficient agricultural sector which would supplement the dominant, urban-industrial sector of society. The urban orientation of rural education reform placed it comfortably within the larger Country Life Movement and gained it urban attention and support, but it was also the key element in its failure in the countryside.

On the surface, the overwhelmingly urban orientation of rural education reformers is not readily apparent. Certainly, the rural education system seemed to be in serious need of reform for the sake of rural people themselves. While urban schools had undergone important modifications during the late nineteenth century, rural education remained similar to what it had always been. When the urban and the rural systems were compared, the

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latter seemed particularly inadequate and inappropriate for the modern age. In the urban systems, said A. C. Monahan in a 1913 Bureau of Education survey of rural education, "school affairs are on the whole well managed, the schools are supervised by trained educators, and are taught by well-educated and professionally trained teachers. The schoolhouses are modern, sanitary, and well equipped with adequate furnishing and facilities for teachers." In sharp contrast, it appeared to Monahan that the rural schools lacked "intelligent and economical management, adequate supervision, and efficient teaching." Generally, rural schools were "housed in uncomfortable buildings . . . without proper furniture or facilities for heating, ventilating, and lighting," and they lacked "adequate provisions for guarding the health and morals of the children" as well as "equipment for teaching."[1] Educators also pointed out that inadequate facilities, instruction, and supervision in rural schools were paralleled by a narrow, traditional curriculum emphasizing the three r's --with a smattering of civics and history--and by an instructional method stressing rote memorization and recitation.[2]

Educators proposed to address the problems they saw in rural schools by restructuring rural education on an essentially urban model. Given the fact that the educators were urban and that the contemporary educational reforms had taken place in an urban context, this orientation is not surprising. In place of the dingy, ungraded, one-room schools which dominated rural America, educators proposed modern, consolidated facilities large enough to allow grading. Instead of districts controlled by the local patrons, reformers wanted supervision by professional educators. In place of the untrained, undertrained, and incompetent teachers so common in rural districts, educators

demanded professionally-trained teachers who could meet high standards. And finally, educational reformers sought to replace the narrow rural curriculum with an expanded one which offered such things as music, art, physical education, and vocational training in addition to the traditional primary school subjects.

For the education reformers in the Country Life Movement, these proposed reforms were means to larger ends rather than ends in themselves. And in explaining the goals of rural education reformers the findings of investigators of urban education reform are not very useful. Lawrence Cremin, for example, believes that both urban and rural education reformers attempted to make the schools serve the wants and needs of the people involved, and in a refinement of this thesis Selwyn Troen holds that educational reform in St. Louis derived from the attempt of everyone concerned with the schools to make them appropriate to a pluralistic, changing society.[3] Although rural education reformers always contended that their reforms would benefit rural people and that they were designed to fit the needs of rural society, this was never their primary goal. Moreover, the Cremin and Troen theses assume volition or at least acquiescense on the part of the people whose schools were being reformed. But rural people met the proposed changes with attitudes ranging from apathy to hostility, a fact which frustrated the reformers' efforts.[4] The negative rural attitude raises the possibility that the reformers were interested in social control, as were the Boston reformers investigated by Michael Katz.[5] Paralleling many progressive-era reformers, rural education reformers had no aversion to social control, but for them it was less an end in itself than a means necessary to reach other goals.

Another possibility, this one raised by David Tyack, is that the goal of reformers was to enhance their own positions within the educational system.[6] Certainly, many of the changes they proposed would have benefitted the reformers themselves, and it is reasonable to assume that this self interest was at least a partial motivation for their actions. However, the goal which the reformers stressed time after time, the goal which the Country Life Movement--of which these reformers were a part--emphasized, and the end of the age in general was efficiency. Specifically, rural educational reformers hoped that the changes they proposed would lead to the creation of an efficient agriculture which would adequately supplement the larger, increasingly urban and industrial society.

In their assumption that efficiency was the goal of social activity and social change, rural school reformers were very much in step with their age. As Samuel Haber notes in Efficiency and Uplift: Scientific Management In the Progressive Era, during the early twentieth century the efficiency movement became "a secular Great Awakening."[7] Rural school reformers shared the enthusiasm of their contemporaries for efficiency. "Efficiency," intoned educators George Betts and Otis Hall, "is the demand of the age."[8] As it was used in the progressive era, however, efficiency was a vague term. It was used in the social sense to connote "social harmony and the leadership of the 'competent'," and it was even used in ominous terms like "civic" and "moral" efficiency.[9] Rural education reformers used the word in all of these ways and more, but because of certain particular problems urbanites perceived in the countryside they most often emphasized the economic aspects of efficiency. Hence, when Jackson County,

Minnesota School Superintendent Julius Arp contended in 1918 that "efficiency is the watchword of the world, and industrial efficiency is the keystone of the arch of general efficiency," he was accurately reflecting the views of his colleagues in education reform.[10]

Despite their economic emphasis, it is important to note that rural education reformers believed that when they became more efficient economically country people would become better morally as well. Economic efficiency as a value was deeply rooted in American capitalism and was nurtured by modern industrialism, but it did have a moral component. Country Lifers believed that the efficient man was the socially responsible and socially serviceable man, and this made him morally good. But when they talked about social serviceability and social responsibility in regard to rural people, they always spoke in reference to the larger society. The farmer, they believed, was responsible only insofar as he served the interests of the larger, urban-industrial society. And the way in which the farmer best served that larger society was through the efficient production of food.

Economic efficiency in the countryside was such a compelling concern during the progressive era because of the widely-held belief that agricultural inefficiency was threatening national comfort, well-being, and even survival. During the first twenty years of this century, the domestic supply of foodstuffs rose much more slowly than did the domestic demand for them. This imbalance was reflected in food prices which rose much faster than other prices. Rising food prices discomfitted consumers, but much more than the housewife's happiness seemed at stake. Social commentators believed that without cheap food the competitive advantage of American

industry would melt away, social and political unrest would threaten the nation, and the favorable balance of trade would disappear.[11] Ultimately, the shortage of food indicated by high prices would threaten the very survival of the nation. "Believe me, race suicide if it comes will be due not to a failure of the birth rate:" warned Eugene Davenport of the University of Illinois in his aptly-titled volume, Education for Efficiency, "it will be from our sheer neglect to maintain conditions that will insure food for the people."[12] And in The Work of the Rural School, J.D. Eggleston and Robert W. Bruère melodramatically explained the implications for the nation of a static supply of food and rising demand for it:

> When the farmers stop producing an abundant surplus our growing millions face not only lowered standards of living, but in many cases actual want and starvation. When the harvests cease to be abundant the fires of our national life in country and city alike begin to burn low, the productive powers of the nation are checked--the entire economic and social organism suffers a kind of paralysis.[13]

Rural education reformers, and the Country Life Movement in general, agreed that high food prices were due to the inefficiency of farmers. Increases in supply lagged behind increases in demand because farmers could not or would not apply the lessons of improved farm practice and scientific agriculture which were available. While the urban-industrial nation needed the support of a modern, efficient agriculture, farmers proved reluctant to change.[14]

Exacerbating the problem of rural inefficiency was the problem of rural discontent, which Country Lifers believed was reflected in the movement of population from rural to urban areas. Country Lifers saw this shift as dangerous both because the rising price of food indicated to them that more farmers were needed in the countryside and because they believed that

the best and most efficient farmers were the most likely to leave. Betts and Hall touched both problems when they warned that the exodus from the countryside "has been going on at a time when the country has been urgently in need of more and better farmers, that through their increased numbers and efficiency the cost of living might be reduced."[15] Most Country Lifers agreed, further, that the movement from the farms derived from discontent with rural life in general and with rural social institutions in particular. The "lack of civilizing opportunities in the country districts means fewer people in the country," cautioned W. Carson Ryan, Jr., of the United States Bureau of Education in 1913, "and fewer people in the country means higher and ever higher cost of living."[16] To the Country Lifers, then, the problems of rural America were the related ones of inefficiency and discontent, and rural education reformers agreed that the school was the potential solution for both.

In the attempt of the Country Life Movement to render rural people "efficient and contented," in Secretary of Agriculture David Houston's telling phrase, the rural education system was a key element.[17] One educational reformer contended that "education is the most important question in American country life," and many in the Country Life Movement, whether educators or not, agreed.[18] Country Lifers perceived the school as the most important institution in the renovation of rural life for several reasons. There was first the traditional American faith in the ability of the school to change people. In addition, the fact that the school was a publicly-controlled institution amenable to public pressure made it an attractive agent of change. Another attraction of the public school was

the fact that it directly influenced people when they were young and pliable. But the rural school was particularly important because it was a far more significant institution in the social life of the countryside than the urban school was in the social life of the city. The countryside had few social institutions, and this made those few which existed--such as the school--potentially very important as shaping influences for the community as a whole. Small wonder that numerous Country Lifers agreed with the emphatic judgment of Betts and Hall that "education is the open road to efficiency."[19]

The enthusiasm of Country Lifers for education should not obscure the fact that even to them it was only the potential means to an efficient and contented rural society. Every commentator on education agreed that, as it stood, the rural education system was virtually useless as a means to change. Stanford professor Ellwood P. Cubberley and Wisconsin professor Edward C. Elliott were by no means exaggerating when they concluded in 1915 that "the absolute inadequacy of the rural school of to-day to meet the new educational and social needs of to-morrow is evident to almost everyone."[20] The rural education system was inadequate, in the eyes of its many critics, because it was far too narrow. Generally, the function of the rural schools remained the traditional one of merely complementing the other educational institutions of society, such as the church, the neighborhood, and particularly the family. Each of these institutions assumed educational responsibilities in preparing the child for his future moral, social, and economic life. The school's role was to complement these institutions by providing young people with a few traditional technical skills encompassed by the term "book learning." This was

how rural schools had always operated in the United States, but rural education reformers had a far more expansive view of the potential of formal education than that encompassed by the country schools. "Education spells efficiency," contended George Betts in 1913, insofar as it prepares the person educated to lead "a more fruitful life in the home, the state, the church, and other social institutions," to do "more effective work in a worthy occupation," and to develop "greater enjoyment and appreciation of the finer values of personal experience."[21] In short, the valuable formal education was that which encompassed the traditional function of the school as well as the educational functions previously left to the other institutions of society. It was the education which prepared people "to get ready to live" in the comprehensive sense of the term.[22] Because they viewed the school as an institution potentially undertaking comprehensive socialization, rural education reformers concluded that the traditional country school was hopelessly inadequate.

The creation of the sort of comprehensive education reformers wanted demanded revolutionary changes in the role of the rural school and in the way the school viewed its role. The school had important new social responsibilities to fulfill, revolving around the preparation of young people "for service in community life" in the broad sense of the term.[23] The schools could best prepare young people for community service by embracing the "new individualism," which stressed the idea that the individual was a social being with duties to the society of which he was a part. As President John W. Cook of the National Educational Association explained it, "a crowning quality of this new individualism will be its recognition of the dignity of duty. We declare that the core of democracy is service. The good citizen is he who is socially serviceable." Rural education reformer

Harold Waldstein Foght contended that the rural school should "help the farmer to take his part in the larger social group. This is education for citizenship, community, state, national, and internationl." And Evelyn Dewey added the common judgment of her colleagues that "a moral life is a socialized life."[24] These statements, so representative of progressive educators and of the progressive era in general, sound rather idealistic on the surface. However, when rural education reformers talked about "socializing" rural people what they usually meant was making them more efficient producers who could better supply the larger society with food. Eggleston and Bruère made this point with particular clarity:

> The opportunity of the rural school in the building of our civilization is summed up in the fact that it, more than any other one instrument, controls the food-supply of the nation--the foundation of our spiritual as well as of our physical life. From the point of view of the nation the work of the public school is to get a maximum product in efficient citizenship out of the community to which it is assigned, and the distinguishing mark of efficient citizenship in the rural community is skill in the production of food.[25]

Under this new, comprehensive view of the role of rural education, then, the job of the school was to inculcate young people with a broad sense of social duty and service. Rural people could best serve the society of which they were a part by producing food for it in an efficient manner. And the rural people who accepted that contention and acted on it were the most completely socialized. That efficiency in the production of food for the benefit of urban-industrial America was the main concern of rural education reformers became even clearer in the specific proposals they made for changes in rural education.

When Country Lifers talked about rural education reform, they generally broke it into two separate but related parts, "reorganization and redirection."[26] In terms of social role redirection encompassed the change discussed above, and in specific terms this usually translated into curriculum reform. Like most of the other facets of rural education, reformers saw the rural curriculum as hopelessly narrow and inadequate to the demands of the modern age. Consequently, they hoped to expand it by adding such things as art, music, physical education, nature study, and vocational education to it. Reformers justified each of these new studies on the grounds of maintaining or increasing efficiency. Art and music, for example, were expected to make intelligent people more contented with rural life and thus more likely to stay in the countryside. Physical education would develop strong and coordinated bodies, and nature study would inculcate a love of the countryside. But because it was so closely related to the problem of rural inefficiency, vocational education in agriculture and home economics was the area on which reformers concentrated. Vocational training in agriculture and home economics was attractive to Country Lifers because it promised to make agriculture more efficient in three ways. First, when children were taught "to do in a perfect way the things their fathers and mothers are doing in an imperfect way, in the home, in the shop, [and] on the farm," in the arrogant phrase of Frederick T. Gates of the General Education Board, they would be better farmers and homemakers in the future.[27] Second, if students learned to see farming and homemaking as formal, scientific subjects when they were young, the effects on society would be beneficial. For one thing, bright students would gain respect for rural life and would presumably be more likely to stay in the countryside, solving the problem of

keeping the efficient contented.[28] And if students saw agriculture as a scientific subject in which new developments were always taking place they would be more likely continually to improve their farm practices when they became farmers. "It is becoming increasingly clear that the results of the work of this Department and the experiment stations can not be most effectively and widely utilized by our farmers", warned Secretary of Agriculture James Wilson in 1904, "unless in early life they are taught to think and act along the lines in which the application of scientific principles and discoveries is made to appear theoretically rational as well as practically useful."[29] And finally, some reformers even hoped that curriculum reforms would bear immediate fruit when parents copied the techniques their children learned.[30] So the redirection of rural education promised great benefits, but in order to be effective the reformers believed it demanded the reorganization of rural schools.

The form of reorganization universally favored by rural education reformers was school consolidation, the unification of several one-room school districts into a single district served by a large, centralized school. Indeed, the reformers believed that the comprehensive changes they advocated were "beyond all but the exceptional one-teacher schools."[31] Consolidation would increase the financial resources available in the countryside and would thus facilitate the hiring of better-trained teachers, including specialists in the new subjects proposed for the rural curriculum. But consolidation would also carry other advantages which would make the schools more efficient and would allow them better to fulfill their task of inculcating efficiency. For example, with consolidation grading and platooning could be instituted,

more modern and attractive facilities could be created, and, because consolidated schools were farther removed from the patrons than were their one-room predecessors, professional supervision could be advanced.[32]

Between 1900 and 1920 rural education reformers worked hard to bring their ideas to fruition. From their posts in state universities and normal schools they attempted to spread their gospel to new teachers. From their positions in philanthropic organizations they tried to induce rural schools to change. Through local and national media they endeavored to persuade rural people that the changes were valuable. And through the state and national legislatures they worked for legal pressures and inducements for modifications in the rural education system. The energy they devoted to working for change was indicative of the consequences they believed the nation would suffer if reform was not forthcoming. But just as they warned of dire consequences if their suggestions were not adopted, they promised revolutionary benefits if the desired changes took place. Harold Foght promised that the "new school" of the reformers' vision would "train the boys to become scientific farmers and the girls practical farmers' helpmeets," that it would "inculcate a wholesome love for country life," and would "counteract the townward exodus," and that it would even "become the center of all community interest."[33] Foght was by no means alone in attributing possibilities to the rural school which transcended its mere effect on students. The school could transform the rural future by making farm youths efficient and contented, but reformers hoped it could transform the rural present as well. "Every school when transformed. . .," contended Country Lifer Herbert Quick in 1911, "will become the industrial, the business and the economic, as well as the social center of the community."[34]

So the rural education reformers had optimistic and even fantastic hopes for the future of the rural school. The problem they faced was that rural people, who had at least to consent to change, were either indifferent to reform or opposed to it for a variety of reasons. Rural people feared the loss of tight local control over the schools which consolidation would entail, and they believed that the limited financial resources of the countryside made change impractical. They also resented the condescension of school reformers and the implication that the family was failing in its educational role. Because the social and economic changes which had made reform appropriate to urban schools had not yet occurred in a noticeable way in the countryside, the reforms appeared to rural people to be generally inappropriate.[35] And rural people distrusted the reforms as urban uplift or, worse, as urban manipulation designed to reshape the countryside to urban ends. Rural school board member Allen S. Woodward expressed this perception when he noted in 1917 that the direction of rural school reforms "seems to indicate that the country boy should be induced or compelled to do something toward lowering the cost of food."[36]

Rural opposition placed reformers in a difficult position. The problem of rural inefficiency, as reflected in high food prices, got progressively worse between 1900 and 1920, but they were unable to enact the changes they believed would solve the problem. Exhibiting both their frustration and their basically elitist and condescending attitude, reformers indulged increasingly in attacks on rural people as ignorant or vicious. These attacks might have served as a catharsis for the reformers, but they only raised the suspicion of those whose schools they were attempting to reform. Then, after 1920, interest in rural school reform declined sharply. There were many reasons

for the decline in interest in rural education reform, not the least of which was the critical re-examination of most progressive-era ideas which came after the First World War. But the most important cause of the declining interest in rural education reform was the fall in food prices after 1920. When food prices fell the main cause for urban interest in rural life was gone. The Country Life Movement died away, and rural school reform no longer seemed imperative or even very important. The main impetus for rural education reform and the main reason why rural education reformers gained a sympathetic hearing in the nation as a whole was the rising cost of food, which supposedly derived from rural inefficiency. When the cost of food fell rural inefficiency no longer seemed a very serious problem, and those--like the rural education reformers--who had been interested in it dwindled away.

ENDNOTES

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[13]J. D. Eggleston and Robert W. Bruère, The Work of the Rural School (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1913), 2-3.

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[19]Betts and Hall, Better Rural Schools, 455.

[20]Ellwood P. Cubberley and Edward C. Elliot, "Rural-School Administration," School and Society, January 30, 1915, Vol. I, No. 5, 156. See also A. C. True, "Some Problems of the Rural Common School," Yearbook of the United States Department of Agriculture--1901 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1902), 134-135, and Ellwood P. Cubberley, Rural Life and Education (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1914), 97.

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[22]Eugene Davenport, "The Next Step in Agricultural Education; or, The Place of Agriculture in Our American System of Education," (Urbana, Illinois: October 31, 1907, address at Illinois College at Jacksonville, published by Missouri State University at Columbia, January 9, 1908), 14.

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[30]Danbom, "The Industrialization of Agriculture," 109-110.

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[32]Danbom, "The Industrialization of Agriculture," 110-112.

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